

Contra Costa Times

Posted on Thu, Apr. 14, 2005

Man wants to exorcise Mt. Diablo's name

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen

A deeply religious Oakley man has petitioned the federal government to rename Mount Diablo, calling the current name a profane salute to Satan.

In Art Mijares' application to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, the first for this peak, he suggests naming it "Mount Kawukum," a word he believes has American Indian roots.

"Words have power, and when you start mentioning words that come from the dark side, evil thrives," said Mijares.

"When I take boys camping on the mountain -- I don't even like to say its name -- I have to explain what the name means. Why should we have a main feature of our community that celebrates the devil?"

Mijares won't have to face down Lucifer to prevail: He just has to persuade the federal government, the state of California and the Bay Area.

The federal government can change place names only in documents it publishes, which means locals carry significant weight in these matters.

"What we care about is the extent that everyone uses the same name for the same feature," said Roger Payne, secretary to the names board that will eventually vote on the petition.

"It's critical for national security and emergency response. But the board will change a name if warranted and if there's an overwhelming consensus of local folks that want it done."

It might be easier to order a glass of ice water in hell.

The idea immediately drew heat from groups such as Save Mount Diablo, California State Parks and the Mount Diablo Pilots Association.

The peak is a major aviation landmark and provides the name of a 74-year-old state park.

It has been called Mount Diablo for at least 164 years, and references to the mountain permeate thousands of maps, books and historical documents.

Not least of the objections, the nonprofit conservation group Save Mount Diablo would have to become "Save Mount Kawukum."

"We're laughing about the proposal, but this is no laughing matter," said Seth Adams, a leader of Save Mount Diablo. "About once a decade, someone proposes to change Mount Diablo's name, often using some fictitious Indian legend as justification. We don't support the rewriting of history."

The name Kawukum first surfaced in 1866, when a church group tried to change Mount Diablo's name for reasons nearly identical to Mijares', according to noted Bay Area researcher Bev Ortiz.

"We abhor the wicked creature to whom the name is appropriate, and spurn the use of the name for anything noble or good on earth," proclaimed the Congregational Church of San Francisco in its newsletter of the day.

The church proposed Kawukum, spelled then as Kahwookum, "a word learned from an unidentified Indian living at the base of the mountain," Ortiz wrote in a history of the mountain's name. "Despite the fact that church members could not communicate clearly with their consultant, they presumed that 'Kahwookum' meant 'Everything seen' or 'very nearly Pilot Mountain.'"

The church presented a name-change petition to the Legislature. Lawmakers postponed a decision indefinitely, finding nothing offensive in the name Mount Diablo.

Fifty years later, B.S. Sanders revived Kawukum as a real estate gimmick, saying it meant "laughing mountain," a fictitious interpretation designed to lure investors.

Bay Area American Indians called the mountain by several names, such as "Tuyshtak," according to Ortiz.

The name Mount Diablo grew from the Spanish name given to an Indian village set near a willow thicket in modern-day Concord, where Chupcans staged a daring nighttime escape during an 1805 military campaign.

Spanish soldiers said Indians evaded them only with the help of evil spirits and named the site "Monte del Diablo," or thicket of the devil, which American explorers later mistakenly applied to the mountain. The first official appearance of the name dates to 1841, when the famed United States Exploring Expedition led by Lt. Charles Wilkes recorded the peak as "Mount Diablo."

As for returning the mountain to an Indian word, one Bay Area native is not convinced. People often profess to honor American Indians when it fits their agenda, said Andrew Galvan, a descendent of the Bay Miwok and Ohlone tribes, which both have ties to Mount Diablo.

"Mount Diablo wasn't even named for the devil," said Galvan, a curator for Old Mission Dolores in San Francisco. "And this name, 'Kawukum,' this is the first I've heard it. How do we even know the word was properly translated?"

Mijares says "Kawukum" is only a suggestion, and that he is open to other names.

"I'll be talking with Native Americans to see whether another name might be more appropriate."

Reach Lisa Vorderbrueggen at 925-945-4773 or lvorderbrueggen@cctimes.com.